

## **ARIZONA CHARTER SCHOOLS QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

### ***What are charter schools?***

Charter schools are public, state-funded schools. Charter schools were created through legislation in 1994. Charter schools contract with the State Board of Education, the State Board for Charter Schools or a district to provide an education service. Charter schools cannot charge tuition.

### ***What is the purpose of charter schools?***

Charter schools are established to provide a learning environment that will improve pupil achievement. Charter schools are created to provide additional academic choices for parents and students.

### ***How does a charter school get a charter?***

There are three ways to obtain a contract to operate a charter school in Arizona, by applying to: 1) The State Board for Charter Schools, 2) The State Board of Education, and 3) any local district governing board.

### ***What is the School's Mission?***

Every charter school has its own individual mission or vision. This vision should be present in every aspect of the school and those involved in the school should share this vision. As a parent of a student in a charter school, you and your child should share this vision. To learn about the school's mission, consider:

- visiting with the school's founders
- attending a board meeting
- reading the school's charter
- attending class (preferably the class in which your child would be)
- attending a school assembly

### ***What is the organizational structure of charter schools?***

Charter schools are organized and operated in a variety of ways. Each charter school has a governing board. Each charter school also has a sponsoring entity such as the State Board of Education, the State Board for Charter Schools or a school district. Each charter school must comply with everything in its charter contract with the state as well as with all applicable state, federal and local laws and regulations.

Some charter schools are organized as non-profit corporations, for-profit corporations and still others have different structures. To learn more about the structure of a charter school, consider:

- asking to see bylaws and articles of incorporation
- obtaining a description of board members and their respective backgrounds
- reviewing the school's charter
- attending a board meeting

### ***Who makes decisions at charter schools?***

School decisions are made at the school level. The sponsoring boards have very little to do with daily charter school operations. Each charter school develops its own policies related to discipline, personnel, attendance, etc. To learn about the policies of a charter school, consider asking to see policies and procedure manuals that may include:

- personnel and board operations
- parent groups/committees
- student discipline and attendance
- student performance/grading

### ***What is the School's Teaching Philosophy?***

Each charter school subscribes to a certain teaching philosophy or a combination of philosophies. It is important that your child flourish in this specific educational setting. To learn more about the school's teaching philosophy, consider:

- viewing lesson plans for a complete school week
- reading the curriculum portion of the charter
- visiting with classroom teachers
- reviewing the school's marketing materials
- observing a parent/teacher meeting
- determining if the curriculum is consistent with the mission

### ***How will the school implement its program of instruction?***

Charter schools utilize unique and innovative ideas and methods to meet their educational goals. To learn if these methods are best suited to your child, consider:

- What specific teaching techniques and strategies are used?
- What materials does the school have to implement its educational goals?
- What classroom materials do teachers have to implement educational goals?
- How are the classrooms organized?
- Is the average class size conducive to the teaching methods described?
- What are the qualifications of the teaching staff?
- What kind of professional development opportunities are available to teaching staff?

### ***Does the School Meet Its Prescribed Goals?***

Charter schools participate in the state's nationally standardized norm-referenced achievement test and AIMS. Each charter school also completes an annual report card for the Department of Education and an annual report for its sponsoring board. The annual report cards are available on the Arizona Department of Education's web site. Charter schools also design a method to measure pupil progress toward student outcomes.

As a parent, you may want to explore whether these measurements meet your child's current and future needs. For instance, if your child is considering attending a college/university that requires graded transcripts, you may want to investigate charter schools that provide graded transcripts.

*Some other things to consider are:*

- What kinds of assessments are used?
- Are the assessment tools consistent with the mission of the school?
- Are the goals clear and can progress toward the goals be measured?
- Does the teaching staff have experience using this type of assessment?
- What do student report cards contain and what is their frequency?
- How is student progress communicated to parents?

### ***What is the role of parents in charter schools?***

As a parent, you are making a conscious choice to consider participating in the education marketplace. Most charter schools provide opportunities for parental involvement ranging from volunteering in the classroom to serving on a site council. To learn more about the potential role of parents in a specific charter school, consider:

- looking at the school's charter
- attending parent meetings
- observing classrooms with parent volunteers
- talking with parents of students

### ***Who may attend charter schools?***

Any Arizona student in grade K-12 may attend a charter school. Parents and students may submit a timely application to any charter school for consideration.

### ***Do charter schools have to enroll any and all students?***

Charter schools must serve all students, including those with special needs. They may cap class size if approved by their sponsor. If the number of applicants exceeds the spaces available they must provide an equitable system such as a lottery for enrolling students. To learn about admission to a specific charter school, you may want to consider:

- viewing the school's admissions policies and procedures
- obtaining a description of how the school meets the needs of all students, including handicapped and other special needs students
- reviewing the marketing materials used to recruit students
- viewing the waiting list (if one exists)
- reviewing the charter

### ***How can a parent find out about the qualifications and certifications of the teachers and other instructional staff at a charter school?***

By law, charter schools are required to keep a book of resumes of all present and former instructional staff members. This book must be made available to parents upon request. Resumes shall include an individual's educational and teaching background and experience in a particular academic content subject area.

### ***How are charter schools funded and is it a stable source of funding?***

Charter schools are funded by the state and receive money based on student attendance. A specific charter school's funding is as stable as the school's enrollment. Charter schools may also solicit and receive contributions. To determine the funding situation of a charter school consider:

- asking about daily enrollment figures
- viewing budgets included in the charter
- reviewing an audited financial statement (if an external audit has occurred)
- getting a description of donations
- viewing the most recent quarterly financial statement

## **Parents and Students In An Education Marketplace**

Charter schools are part of the education marketplace in Arizona. Charter schools provide parents and students with many educational choices. An important part of making a choice in a marketplace is gathering information. This brochure is designed to guide you in your quest for information as you consider your education options.

### ***What is the length of a charter school contract?***

The term of charter school contracts is fifteen years. Charters are reviewed by the sponsoring board every five years and monitored regularly.

### ***What if I have a question, concern or complaint?***

Charter schools are independent public schools and most operational decisions are made on-site. If you have an issue with a charter school, try to resolve the issue at the school site or with the operator of the school. If this action does not result in a resolution, find out when the governing board of the school meets and bring your concern before the board for consideration.

It is generally helpful to view the charter during the complaint process to determine if the school is acting outside of the parameters of its charter. You may also decide during this process that this particular charter school is not the best fit for your child's needs.

If this process does not result in resolution, put your concern in writing and submit it to the sponsoring board, either the State Board of Education, the State Board for Charter Schools, or the local district governing board.